

108-88-AC-136-201-176
'resentation for 'Great Places' is given this week for Belle Plaine

By JEFF ORVIS
Union editor

Sharing their vision of a revitalized city, several city government and business leaders are presenting their case for designating Belle Plaine as one of three "Iowa Great Places" before a citizens board. The committee, appointed by Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, was scheduled to be in the city today (Wednesday) to hear the one-hour presentation.

Belle Plaine is one of an initial list of over 140 cities, counties and regions to apply for the Great Places designation. Developed by the governor and Lt. Gov. Sally Petersen, the concept calls for the winning three entries to receive the services of up to 18 state agencies, in what is described as a "one-stop shop" of currently available state services. Although no specific state funding has been mentioned for the project, the winning entries would benefit from the expertise of these agencies in attaining their goals.

During their presentation, the local group, which includes businessman Don Drahos, attorney Jennifer Zahradnik and City Administrator Bill Daily, was scheduled to present their vision for the future of the city. Although they were instrumental in preparing the final presentation, they received input from various community members, including members of the Community Solutions group, as well as consultant Kent Zimmerman.

"As we have shared our hopes for Belle Plaine, we are seeing ourselves differently," according to an advance copy of the presentation. "No longer viewing ourselves as a place separate from and in competition with the nearby metropolitan areas, we see ourselves as a Great Place in the heart of a great region. This is our vision:

"We see Belle Plaine, Iowa, as a vibrant, energetic, enlightened, and economically strong community – a community that attracts new residents who want to share in the comfort and security of a small town with access to the world.

"Specifically:

"We see Belle Plaine's downtown restored to its original beauty with storefronts looking as they did 100 years ago; with period lighting, planters with flowers in summer, greens in winter, and benches just waiting to welcome residents and visitors.

"We see Belle Plaine as a hub for recreation with spacious parks; walking/biking trails and cross country ski runs; hunting areas, and a river brimming with canoes, kayaks and tubes.

"We see a Belle Plaine with clean, neat neighborhoods with housing for singles, young families, empty nesters and seniors.

"We see a meticulously restored high

school in Belle Plaine alongside a new recreation and aquatic center with both buildings serving the entire community.

"We see Belle Plaine promoting a handsome history through its beautiful new museum and restored depot, both filled with the stories and memorabilia of an immigrant heritage, the Lincoln Highway and the railroad.

"We see Belle Plaine creating homegrown businesses to serve other businesses in town, and lifelong learning opportunities through the growing Kirkwood Community College satellite facility.

"We see Belle Plaine citizens coming together to create one dynamic community organization to accomplish all this and more."

According to the presentation, Belle Plaine is in a great position for progress. Its proximity to Cedar Rapids, Waterloo-Cedar Falls and Iowa City was pointed out, along with the easy access to state universities, major highways and its position near the borders of four counties.

Much has already been done to make Belle Plaine a "Great Place." The group pointed out some of the improvements that have been made in recent years:

"Our Place has had a long-standing and continued commitment to the preservation of its history. Early history has been recorded through word and pictures in the Belle Plaine "Centennial History Book," 1862-1962. Additionally,

* 2004 saw the construction of a \$980,000 area museum building on Belle Plaine's Main Street, the Old Lincoln Highway. Benefactor funding totaled \$500,000, local contributions were \$80,000 and Vision Iowa/CAT funds \$250,000. The building boasts an impressive Czech-cut glass chandelier and will have the largest brick mural wall in the state, on the outside west wall depicting historical events of the area.

* Students of the Iowa State University School of Design, identified ways to improve Main Street and promote the historic value of the railroad and Lincoln Highway, completed a Community Enhancement Study in 2002. Some signage and building improvements cited have been completed or are ongoing.

* Recently, \$900 grant from Alliant Energy was spent by the local downtown group to restore a turn of the century advertising sign that would have greeted travelers along the old Lincoln Highway.

* When the new Public Library was constructed in 1990, the old Carnegie Library replica was scheduled for demolition before a group of citizens stepped up and promoted its preservation. As a result of their efforts and the generosity of benefactors, the building is now the Kirkwood Community College Tippie-Mansfield Center.

* The design of a new community

South Benton
Star-Press
Blairtown, IA
Circ. 1564
From Page:
10
9/28/2005
43488



South Benton
Star-Press
Blairstown, IA
Circ. 1564
From Page:
10
9/28/2005
43488

brochure and web page are underway, outlining the history of our place. Future displays at the museum will feature an exhibit of the early businesses in Belle Plaine and German immigration to Iowa."

"Our Place is a member of Priority One, the Cedar Rapids Chamber Commerce Economic Development arm and has utilized their expertise in attracting and evaluating new business and in helping process applications. This liaison has helped Our Place in offering the latest IDIED program to the community.

"The City has created TIF districts for new businesses in Belle Plaine or for existing business expansion.

"Both the City and School District passed a 1 percent local option sales tax within the same month on separate referendums to help fund facility and infrastructure improvements. For the upcoming year this is projected to generate \$250,000 for each entity.

"Our Place has worked with IDIED, Benton Development, ECICOG and others to attract new business and help existing businesses in Belle Plaine, as well as participating in state and area programs for grants and loans.

"Belle Plaine Improvement Corp., a private corporation, has a long-time history of assisting small business and housing development with venture capital.

"Our Place enjoys community participation in local improvement projects as evidenced by:

1.) The Belle Plaine Community Library built in 1990 at a cost of \$450,000. Benefactors provided funding of \$250,000 with the balance coming from Community contributions.

2.) The Belle Plaine Municipal Airport, which was built at a cost of \$1,950,000. With \$850,000 in DOT funds, benefactor contributions of \$950,000 and local funds of \$150,000.

3.) The Kirkwood Community College satellite, Tippie Education Center, latest expansion completed in 2005, with a cost of over \$500,000, with benefactor funding of \$250,000, local funds of \$100,000 with the balance coming from school funds.

4.) Belle Plaine has received benefactor funding on a consistent basis from Henry Tippie, the Mansfield Trust and Ted Fetter. Since the year 2000, this total funding has exceeded \$2,000,000 toward community and educational development. Their commitment to Belle Plaine continues and we would expect their support in future projects. This, along with the 1 percent local option sales tax of the City and School, plus the additional \$3,000,000 and \$8,000,000 bonding capacity respectively, puts us in a strong position for continued community improvement.

"Belle Plaine has begun an effort to position Our Place to attract both 'urban immigrants' and new businesses in search of a great place to grow. Our three-year goal for small and medium businesses is to continue to assist current businesses to expand and to attract one or more new

employers employing approximately 30-50 employees.

"Belle Plaine has constructed a hard surface airstrip, 4,000 feet, large enough to handle private jet landings. A new, "card swipe" refueling station and new six-space hangar have positioned Belle Plaine to provide airport services to businesses within the region.

"The Kirkwood Community College Tippie-Mansfield Learning Center just expanded with the addition of the Tippie Education Center and is providing educational opportunities for over 100 students per semester. With the expansion came a commitment from a major supporter should additional space be necessary.

"A group of local retailers united in 2000 to address the declining Main Street retail district. With the assistance of Iowa State University School of Design in 2002, an improvement plan was put together and several thousand dollars of private money has been spent on Main Street and a number of businesses have opened.

"Belle Plaine was chosen as one of the seven original places for the Iowa Stories 2000 Literacy Communities Project. The project was successfully completed and has evolved into a monthly gathering headed by the Belle Plaine Historical Society, averaging 50 people in attendance."

"Belle Plaine just completed a \$90,000 sewer-lining project and has committed to spend \$50,000 per budget year for at least the next five years. Over the past two years the City has spent over \$300,000 on capital improvements while replacing equipment and upgrading infrastructure.

"We have 24-hour police protection provided by four full-time officers and five reserves. An ongoing and vigorous nuisance abatement program has been implemented as part of an effort to make Our Place attractive and safe for visitors and residents.

"The City just approved a service agreement with East Central Iowa Council of Governments to prepare a Community Development Block Grant Housing Fund application for owner-occupied housing rehabilitation. If approved five homeowners can receive \$24,999 in funds for housing rehab with the City contributing \$1500 per project.

"We are continually positioning ourselves to meet the demands of the future. The City's current debt is \$1,078,478 with a limit of \$4,270,951 and just this past fiscal year dropped the tax rate 83 cents per \$1,000 valuation. This helps put the City in a good position to attract development. In the recent past we have built a new public library, fire station and community center, the center is used for senior dining and many meeting and social functions in Our Place.

"In 2004, the City passed a local option sales tax referendum by a 63 percent majority, which is estimated to generate \$250,000 in additional revenue, with 25 percent going for building maintenance, 20 percent to debt relief and 55 percent to property tax relief. Only a few weeks later the school district passed a 1 percent sales



tax referendum to go along with their \$5,000,000 bonding capacity.

The presentation included comments from several people with Belle Plaine ties, including Henry Tippie, Brad Cook, who owns two manufacturing facilities in the city, Pat Dreibelbis, administrator of the Mansfield Trust, Michael Garvin, a part-time Belle Plaine resident who serves as an advisor to several Fortune 500 health care companies and has started several businesses of his own, Jennifer Zahradnik, an attorney who joined an established law firm in Belle Plaine in recent years and Jon Drahos, an 11-year-old native who described life in a small town.

The presentation concluded with the group listing what needs to be done in Belle Plaine in the near and long-term future:

"A recent community audit revealed weaknesses that exist in Our Place. Key among these is the lack of a central organization with the support of local residents and the varied resources necessary to bring our vision from idea to reality. Belle Plaine has the traditional development group and there is a spirit of collaboration, yet there has been a lack of communication as well as a lack of unity in focus. Over the past five years and especially the past 18 months, a movement has grown that has changed that. Work is underway to create one organization, which brings together the City, business groups and the general citizenry. With a shared vision, aggressive goals and a broad spectrum of area residents participating, our hope is to not only address our weaknesses but to establish Belle Plaine as one of Iowa's greatest places. The time frame for creating this organization is the next 90 days.

"Three areas of weakness emerged from the audit beyond organization and communication: education, recreation and the downtown business district. These form the initial thrust of our efforts.

"Belle Plaine has the regions newest high school facility and we already serve students from Benton, Tama, Poweshiek and Iowa counties. In addition, Kirkwood Community College has a center in Belle Plaine with enrollment of over 100 students. Presently, the high school and early elementary buildings sit on opposite ends of a large tract of land on Belle Plaine's southeast corner. Two other older buildings and an administration building are spread throughout Our Place. This requires extra travel and presents scheduling problems. With a single sports court at the high school, physical education and sports practice also cause scheduling problems. Ample space exists on school property, which would allow for high school expansion, new grade school and junior high buildings and a Kirkwood Community College location. In a single, spreading campus we see pre-kindergarten students entering school at the Longfellow building, passing through the stages of education in separate centers located within walking distance of one another: walking in as a pre-kindergart-

ner and exiting with an Associate of Arts degree and beyond. Tying Kirkwood's location to the high school would encourage broader education for students and set Belle Plaine as the regional educational super center.

"New recreation facilities located on this same property further increase the quality of education available in Our Place. The construction of a recreation center with: three basketball/volleyball courts, walking track, cardio room, meeting rooms and possible pool, allows shared use by the school and all area residents. Agreements on use would allow for high school scheduling of court space and as an aquatic center is incorporated into the complex, additional extra-curricular activities become possible. This addresses weakness in the school facilities as well as providing 12 month a year recreational opportunities for all area residents, another weakness emerging from the audit. By bringing Kirkwood, the school system and public recreation together, we bring down facility costs, increase usage and create an environment where people of all ages can interact in a positive, safe and controlled environment.

"We also envision a regional entrepreneurial school located at the Kirkwood Center that would attract people and ideas to Our Place. With the presence of Kirkwood, we also see the early introduction of the entrepreneurial spirit. Young people with fresh ideas could easily be channeled into an entrepreneurial studies program while still in high school. Idea and business development resulting from such a relationship could have tremendous long-term effects on the future development of Our Place

'Belle Plaine's Main Street was reconstructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century after being destroyed by fire. With the slogan "From Ashes to Elegance", local business owners replaced many wood frame buildings with stone and brick structures boasting copper trim, elaborate brick designs and other ornate features. As business in small towns has declined and "modernization" attempts have altered some building fronts, our Main Street reflects but a shadow of its former elegance. Recognizing the importance of preserving both the businesses still operating on Main Street and the buildings themselves, the Downtown and Neighborhoods Committee has determined to do the following:

- * Create a means of reinvestment in the downtown area.

- * Address Main Street curb appeal.

- * Resurface streets.

- * Continue building improvements - especially store fronts.

- * Improve upper building levels and building backs.

- * Add brighter lighting that reflects the 19th century architecture.

- * Identify vacant property owners and address buildings beyond repair.

- * Improve vacant lots employing them as meeting places and "pass through" routes.

South Benton
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Circ. 1564
From Page:
10
9/28/2005
43488





* Reopen an artesian well somewhere on Main Street.

“We believe that an attractive Main Street will ignite new interest in the downtown area bringing new customers, new businesses and new tourist to Our Place.

“While our agenda is aggressive, we are realistic and have long-term work in

view.”

The Great Places Committee will make its decision known at a workshop Oct. 11 at the University of Iowa.

Daily said even if Belle Plaine is not selected for the initial designation, much has been learned in preparing for the presentation.

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Star-Press
Blairstown, IA
Circ. 1564
From Page:
10
9/28/2005
43488